

Beyond Shifting Language in Community Engagement and the Social Services Sector: Reflections and Recommendations

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Abstract

Community-engaged researchers and social service practitioners increasingly adopt nonstigmatizing language to foster respectful and inclusive relationships with communities. However, little attention has been paid to whether decisions about preferred terminology reflect principles of community engagement, particularly the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience (PWLE) in determining how they are represented. Using homelessness as an illustrative example, this conceptual article argues that debates over nonstigmatizing language are also questions of community engagement because they reflect whose knowledge is valued and who has authority to define social realities. Although shifting language can reduce stigma, changing terminology does not necessarily improve the lives of PWLE when it occurs without meaningful engagement with affected communities. We examine nonstigmatizing language through three concepts: the euphemism treadmill, virtue signaling, and the disconnect between shifting language and PWLE preferences. We propose best practices that position language as a relational practice grounded in reciprocity and knowledge coproduction.

Keywords: community engagement, nonstigmatizing language, language use, homelessness, social services



In recent years, academic and non-academic literature has emphasized the importance and guided the use of nonstigmatizing language in community-engaged research and practice, as well as the social services sector (Canham et al., 2022; Healy et al., 2022; National Institutes of Health, 2023; Palmer, 2018; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2017; Vojak, 2009). Nonstigmatizing language refers to language aimed at reducing the negative bias and power imbalances in how different groups of people are identified (Vojak, 2009). Through language, we transmit messages about identity, agency, and blame. We can humanize “the other” or increase the stigma and chasm between “us” and “them” (Canham et al., 2022; Healy et al., 2022).

Nonstigmatizing language aims to promote inclusivity (Canham et al., 2022). Pinker (1994), however, discussed how guidance on the most appropriate language is ever-changing and, in many instances, terms once seen as respectful are quickly considered outdated and replaced with newer, more appropriate terms. Amid this shifting language, little attention has been paid to the disconnect that may exist between the language used by community-based academics and social sector practitioners compared to that used by people with lived experience (PWLE). We acknowledge that the term “people with lived experience” can inadvertently create a distinction between those whose experiences are recognized as expertise and those positioned as researchers and practitioners. Moreover, the term may not resonate with everyone

whose perspectives it seeks to represent, as people may identify themselves through their specific circumstances, experiences, or social identities rather than through a collective label. An ideal example of this phenomenon is the term “homeless,” often used by PWLE, being replaced by academics and practitioners with “people experiencing homelessness,” or those who are “houseless” or “unhoused” (Abrams, 2023; National Institutes of Health, 2023; Slayton, 2021).

Community engagement offers an important theoretical lens through which to examine issues about language. Although definitions vary, community engagement is generally understood as collaborative processes that bring together researchers, practitioners, organizations, and community members to address issues of mutual concern through reciprocal relationships, shared decision-making, and coproduction of knowledge (Carnegie Foundation, 2006; Sandmann et al., 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Rather than positioning researchers and practitioners as experts who generate knowledge for communities, community engagement emphasizes shared authority, mutual learning, and the recognition that communities possess expertise derived from lived experience that is essential for understanding and addressing complex social issues.

From this perspective, decisions about language are not merely questions of respectful communication. They are community engagement practices because they reflect whose knowledge is valued, who has authority to define social realities, and whether PWLE are positioned as partners in knowledge production or as recipients of professional expertise (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Consequently, discussions about preferred terminology should themselves be understood as opportunities for meaningful community engagement.

We therefore find ourselves navigating a nonstigmatizing language dichotomy. On the one hand, we understand that language undeniably matters and the language we use in community engagement and the social services sector shapes how we understand and respond to issues (Palmer, 2018; Vojak, 2009). On the other, adopting language not used by people experiencing the issue indicates a disconnect in practice (Figueroa, 2023; Tsai et al., 2022). This article explores the complexities of the nonstigmatizing language dichotomy by asking who shifting

language serves and introducing best practices for language use in community engagement and the social services sector. There has been minimal scholarly critique of shifting language in recent years, with most discussions appearing on practitioner-focused, nonacademic platforms.

This article explores the complexities of the nonstigmatizing language dichotomy by asking who shifting language ultimately serves and by examining this question through the lens of community engagement scholarship. Although guidance on nonstigmatizing language has grown substantially, comparatively little attention has been paid to whether decisions about terminology themselves reflect the principles of reciprocal engagement, shared decision-making, and coproduction of knowledge with PWLE. We argue that although shifting language has an important role in reducing stigma, the everyday lives of PWLE do not necessarily benefit when language evolves independently of the communities it seeks to represent.

We first examine the importance of using nonstigmatizing language. Next, we share how shifting language may not serve PWLE by presenting three concepts: the euphemism treadmill, virtue signaling, and lack of meaning of shifting language and engagement with PWLE. Finally, we propose best practices for researchers and practitioners that position language not simply as a communication tool, but as a relational practice grounded in reciprocity, shared authority, and meaningful community engagement.

The Importance of Nonstigmatizing Language

Nonstigmatizing language acknowledges that the terms we use actively work to define, categorize, and essentialize people. In turn, language constructs in dominant narratives (Canham et al., 2022) and public perception commonly shape the development of policies and programs (Goddu et al., 2018; Palmer, 2018). PWLE may internalize negative dominant narratives, which further marginalizes their experiences and erases their autonomy.

Indeed, language is infused with status, and those with power are largely responsible for shaping the language we use (Vojak, 2009). This hegemonic influence is often not identified, and language is commonly misunderstood to convey an objective reality. The field of discourse analysis has risen

in response to the perceived neutrality of language and is focused on uncovering the deeper meaning behind how and why we use the language that we do (Mayan, 2023). Discourse analysis has shown that our language can play an important role in maintaining power imbalances and urges us to consider the context in which concepts are communicated.

Given the weight that our language holds, the use of person-first language (e.g., referring to someone as “a person experiencing homelessness” instead of “a homeless person”) has emerged as one model of nonstigmatizing language (Healy et al., 2022; USICH, 2017). Person-first language is advocated by organizations including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the American Psychological Association, and some branches of the Canadian federal government (Government of Canada, 2022; USICH, 2017). For example, the intent of shifting away from using the term “homeless” is that it reduces the stigma associated with not having a place to live and recognizes that people without a house can still have a home. By emphasizing our shared humanity, the goal of person-first language is to reduce negative stereotyping and blaming of individuals and instead focus on the structural issues that create unmet needs and marginalization (Goddu et al., 2018; Healy et al., 2022; USICH, 2017). It is part of a larger movement within community engagement and the social services sector toward person-centered approaches that start with individuals’ strengths within the context of their unmet needs (USICH, 2017).

The preference for person-first and other types of nonstigmatizing language is also advocated as a way to “walk the talk” by using language that better reflects our values and is aligned with the kind of world we wish to live in (Goddu et al., 2018; USICH, 2017). It is related to the concept of critical consciousness, which refers to the transformational ideas and practices needed to disrupt systems of oppression and to challenge power imbalances (Gill, 2013). Gill advocated that critical consciousness is something that can be spread to others, fostering societal transformation through collective action. Vojak (2009) agreed and asserted that language is one tool for spreading critical consciousness, calling on “those aimed at social justice [to] take every opportunity to de-stigmatize and normalize the language” (p. 945). They also made the point

that changing our language is something we can do immediately, making it an accessible way to create change.

How Shifting Language May Not Serve Those Experiencing the Issue

The benefits, however, of shifting language hinge precariously on the assumption that doing so will result in changes in actions and improvement in people’s lives. We argue that a focus on shifting language alone primarily serves those working in community engagement and the social services sector rather than PWLE. Therefore, it is important to discuss the possible immediate implications of shifting language and how it might not be linked to positive outcomes for PWLE. We do so through describing three concepts: the euphemism treadmill, virtue signaling, and the lack of meaning of shifting language and engagement with PWLE.

The Euphemism Treadmill

According to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) euphemism is “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.” Pinker’s (1994) euphemism treadmill describes how people create new “polite” terms to refer to upsetting or unseemly things to mask our discomfort with difficult issues. Eventually, because these new terms become “tainted by association,” they need to be replaced again (Pinker, 1994, para. 13). Instead of helping to reframe an issue and challenge people’s misconceptions, Pinker argued that the euphemism treadmill shows how simply changing a term does not necessarily change how we view something; otherwise, we would not need to keep updating it.

When it comes to homelessness, Robbins (2022) pointed out that “the word homeless isn’t inherently stigmatized. It’s the entire concept of homelessness that’s stigmatized. All the biases, stereotypes, misunderstandings, and hatred people have for homeless people don’t dissipate the moment they’re called unhoused people” (“So Why Do We Have So Many Words?” section). Furthermore, new terms have been criticized as confusing and awkward on a practical level because, to be inclusive, they are less specific and possibly dismissive (Abrams, 2023; O’Neill, 2011). For example, the shift from describing someone as “handicapped” to “physically challenged” glosses over and diminishes the profound

difference between an individual experiencing physical challenges from time to time and one having a condition that pervades and permeates everyday life (O'Neill, 2011). To this end, Pinker (1994) argued a better gauge for progress toward equality and mutual respect will be when terms for different groups of people remain stable.

Virtue Signaling

Virtue signaling, criticized as performative, may occur when someone is using the “most correct” language or making moral claims in an effort to convey what a good, conscientious person they are (Benn, 2021; Zentz, 2021). Indeed, virtue signaling is a contentious and much debated notion that was described and denounced in 2015 by journalist James Bartholomew (although there is no consensus on whether he invented the term; Benn, 2021). Benn described virtue signaling in the context of the “worst manifestations” of moralism.

When moralism takes the form of hounding people because of something they may have said, the vain moralizer signals his or her “virtue” by joining in the hounding in order to be admired by the others going after the victims. He or she is like children who befriend playground bullies by joining in with the bullying and may be afraid that if they do not, they will be bullied themselves. The moralizer’s actions are different from wanting to be part of a collective action against something that one perceives as bad (Benn, 2021).

To this end, Pinker (1994) pointed out the power at play when using the latest terms often “shows not sensitivity but subscribing to the right magazines or going to the right cocktail parties” (para. 16). Indeed, virtue signaling is elitist and reserved for those who have ongoing access to formal education and the luxury of contemplation. And those who have this luxury often enact what Pinker cautioned against, which is unfairly judging those who use “outdated” language as prejudiced and insensitive. It is argued that the focus on language ignores other important factors, such as the context in which something is said and the tone in which it is delivered (Omerov et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2011). Virtue signaling can then serve as a mechanism for academics and practitioners to feel they are contributing to social change. Robbins (2022) went further by saying that debates on the most current correct term can be a distraction, as

remarking on someone’s language is much easier than doing the hard work of dismantling the structures that are at the root of the issue.

Lack of Meaning of Shifting Language and Engagement With PWLE

The final critique regarding shifting language is that it often lacks momentum and meaning with PWLE. For example, despite newer, more inclusive terms, most people without housing still choose to refer to themselves as homeless (Abrams, 2023; Robbins, 2022), and for some individuals and groups, identity-first language (e.g., homeless or unhoused person) might still be acceptable or even preferred (Healy et al., 2022).

A 2020 survey conducted by Tsai et al. (2022) in the United States found that among adults who had lived without housing and adults who had not, the most used term by both groups was “homeless.” In contrast, the service providers, academics, and policy-makers surveyed were found to prefer the term “people experiencing homelessness” (Tsai et al., 2022, p. 417). Figueroa (2023), who has personally experienced homelessness, examined this disconnect and argued that “instead of creating new language, perhaps we should direct our efforts toward connecting with homeless people” (para. 8). In a review of 22 studies of people experiencing homelessness and their experiences with health and social care, Omerov et al. (2020) found that professional encounters described as positive and helpful included those when practitioners took the time to listen, remembered details about their lives, and, as a result, catered resources to their individual needs.

In contrast, in the context of homelessness, some authors have pointed out that those who might be most vocal in debates over language have yet to engage with PWLE and are not personally affected by the issue (Robbins, 2022). Green (2021) shared her experience of being labeled as having “complex needs” (p. 209) when she was experiencing homelessness. Although “complex needs” is considered by many practitioners to be the most current and thus appropriate language, Green said she internalized this label and it limited her sense of agency. And regardless of what terms are used, they all essentially make the same error of focusing on the individual’s, rather than the system’s, shortcomings. As argued by Figueroa

(2023), developing effective, empathetic, and sustainable change for homelessness, as well as many other social justice issues, rests on connecting with, building relationships with, and creating spaces for PWLE to lead the conversation.

Summary

Understanding the power of language and how it can be manipulated to construct and exclude PWLE is critical in community engagement and in the social services sector. Shifting to nonstigmatizing language allows those working in the field to feel good, knowledgeable, and conscientious, demonstrating their awareness of the latest in language use. It is also gratifying because changing one's language can happen immediately. These benefits are notable, for working in community engagement and the social services sector is demanding work and progress can feel elusive. However, understanding the mechanisms that also underlie shifting language—euphemisms, virtue signaling, and disassociation from PWLE—demonstrates how it can dangerously mask inaction, be elitist, and further distance the realities of PWLE, academics, and practitioners. If our obsession becomes shifting language alone, it results in primarily serving those working in community engagement and the social services sector, and PWLE only secondarily. Nonstigmatizing language then becomes more of a façade, cloaking inaction on a multifaceted issue that requires addressing the root causes of unmet basic human needs. To address the lure of relying on nonstigmatizing language, we now consider best practices for navigating shifting language.

Best Practices When Navigating Shifting Language

Several key practices can guide both academics and practitioners to navigate shifting language. First, a best practice is to focus more on the content of what someone is saying and less on the language they use. Those working in community engagement and the social services sector are often mesmerized by language and triggered by hearing someone use a term considered outdated or stigmatizing, and consequently, judge and label this person as prejudiced (Benn, 2021). By scrutinizing their outdated language or ignoring their comments, we misdirect attention to the wrong thing, which takes away from addressing the issue

itself (Robbins, 2022). Indeed, someone who is using the “correct” language may still be saying harmful things. In the context of homelessness, it does not matter if someone is referring to people as “unhoused” if they are expressing opinions that continue to attribute homelessness to individual failures.

In addition, academics and practitioners can reframe issues beyond language. As discussed, focusing on shifting language may distract from the real issues requiring structural change. Instead of monitoring individuals' language, focus on having a conversation when they make statements that dehumanize individuals or reinforce stereotypes. Another way to reframe an issue is to adopt a power lens by analyzing the role power plays in maintaining inequalities and then identifying how to shift unequal power relations (Heller et al., 2023). Nichols et al. (2018) have written about practical ways to reframe how we communicate about homelessness from an issue that requires charity to one that requires collective action. This shift involves appealing to people's sense of shared commonality, understanding the diversity of peoples' experiences of homelessness, and recognizing the role of systems as both a cause and a solution. Nichols et al. understood that our discourse around issues like homelessness matters; however, public perception is shaped by more than language. Mobilizing the public to act requires a range of techniques beyond a mere change in language.

Finally, consistent with community engagement scholarship, language decisions should emerge through collaborative processes with PWLE rather than being determined solely by researchers or practitioners. Cocreating terminology reflects the principles of reciprocity, shared authority, and mutual learning that distinguish authentic community engagement from consultation (Castleden et al., 2012; Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Centering the voices of PWLE is widely encouraged in community engagement and the social services sector, yet when it comes to decisions about language, it seems these voices are often overlooked (Robbins, 2022). Israel et al. (2008) spoke to this issue directly, pointing out how “socially and economically marginalized communities often have not had the power to name or define their own experience” (p. 50).

Literature about best practices for engaging with PWLE is available (Canadian Centre on

Substance Use and Addiction, 2021; Homer, 2019; Lived Experience Advisory Council, 2016). However, PWLE are not a homogeneous group and may hold different perspectives on how their experiences should be labeled. Prioritizing community engagement and space for PWLE to lead these discussions is key (Figueroa, 2023). In this manner, researchers and practitioners can strive to achieve “ethical validity” (Edwards et al., 2008, p. 17) by achieving greater consistency with the ethical principles of all partners around the table, which is expected to lead to more respectful relationships and generation of ideas. Engaging with communities requires time, as well as researchers’ and practitioners’ commitment to mutual trust, respect, and colearning (Castleden et al., 2012). Nevertheless, we argue that it is an invaluable step in learning PWLE’s preferred language choice, and, as a result, ensuring that preferred language is indeed reflected in your work.

Conclusion

More broadly, this article suggests that community engagement scholars should view language choices as relational practices rather than technical decisions. When communities participate in determining how they wish to be represented, language becomes one expression of shared governance and knowledge coproduction. Conversely, when terminology is developed primarily within academic or professional circles, even with good intentions, it risks reinforcing the very power imbalances that community engagement seeks to address.

Shifting language is used across community engagement and the social services sector, with language concerning homelessness being a prime example. There is no doubt that language can influence public perception and policy, and individuals who advocate for updated terms identify using them as a way for people to “walk the talk.” However, shifting language alone is insufficient to benefit PWLE and can mask inaction. Indeed, shifting language may primarily serve those working in the field through the euphemism treadmill, virtue signaling, and lacking engagement and support from PWLE. Although shifting language is not a new phenomenon, it is important to reflect upon it as a form of privilege that excludes those unable to keep up to date with the “most correct” language, a practice that often serves to distract from real, urgent, and needed structural change.

To navigate shifting language, we can invest time in community engagement, focus on the content of what people are saying, and reframe how we communicate about issues beyond language, so that PWLE remain rightfully at the center of practice, research, and decision making. In this spirit, the best practices recommended here call for further review and input by PWLE. As authors who have professional but not personal experience with the issues being discussed, we recognize that our role in this conversation, along with others working in the field, is to listen and respect the opinions of those who do.



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